

Testimony of Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell
Committee on House Administration
In support of Election Reform
Wednesday, April 25, 2001

Chairman Ney, distinguished members of the committee, fellow secretaries of state – good morning. Thank you for this opportunity to present my views regarding election reform.

Nearly six months have past since Election Day 2000. Since then, unprecedented attention has been directed toward our elections process. The resulting opinions and proposals have been as varied as they are numerous. But we can all agree that conducting and regulating elections is a complex matter.

So as difficult as it may be to only briefly discuss this topic, I would like to touch on what I believe are the most important points to keep in mind while discussing election reform.

First and foremost, elections are state business, and should remain so. It is important that the people closest to the process – state and local officials – be both in charge of and accountable for that process.

Second, statewide universal standards must be established to assure voters that each ballot will be counted in the same manner within each individual state. Never again can we permit ballot tabulation standards to vary from county to county.

Ohio has a solid foundation of long-established universal rules that govern how votes are counted. However, we came to the conclusion that our rules, developed from years of secretary of state advisory opinions and directives, needed General Assembly codification.

Our election reform bill, passed in the Ohio House of Representatives and expected to soon pass in the Ohio Senate, codifies our rules and provides clear instructions to county election officials. It strengthens the authority of the secretary of state to issue instructions regarding the conducting of elections. The bill also creates a committee to study voting machines and funding methods for investment in new voting technology.

Of course, this is just a start. Much more work needs to be done to close the windows of doubt that opened in Americans' minds during the 2000 presidential election. These doubts stem from not only the standards we apply, but the devices we use to cast ballots.

Voters have lost confidence in these devices. Particularly, in the now-infamous punch card voting system, used by 35 percent of voters in the United States.

My office estimates that it would cost Ohioans at least 120 million dollars to replace our punch card machines – used by 74 percent of voters in the state – with either electronic voting systems or second chance optical scan systems.

Unfortunately, election systems upgrade efforts across the country have been met with the harsh reality of tight budgets and overtaxed citizens. While election reform continues to have widespread public support, the resources to implement these costly upgrades are few or non-existent.

In Ohio, as a result of court-ordered school funding fixes, the General Assembly is frantically reallocating budget resources. Dollars for voting systems upgrades – while desperately needed – are competing with funds for mental health services, road construction, welfare and Medicaid just to name a few.

Which brings me to my third point and where the federal government could play an important role – funding for election reforms.

Many pending proposals here in Congress have already addressed this by providing federal funds for matching grants to states and localities to improve voting systems. This type of assistance will be welcomed by – as well as absolutely necessary to – states and localities embarking on election reform.

In addition, I recommend that an independent organization – comprised of state and local government officials – be formed to distribute these funds as well as develop rules for their allocation.

As Secretary of State, it is my responsibility to protect the integrity of Ohio's elections. For me, there is a sense of urgency about election reform. I fear that as more time passes, the attention and lip service given to election reform will produce too few results.

We must not let this issue get swept under the rug. I encourage the members of this committee to facilitate expedient, thoughtful, and effective measures to assist our states with election reform efforts.

Thank you.

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